

01.08.1976

Heavy frost has pinched back the scattered greenery in the Shortgrass Country. Old cows are faster to the feed grounds and staying longer. Ewes carrying any age have lost their autumn flush. Herders are getting that firm look that signals the start of the long feed season.

Grey beards used to say that if you look after your stock they'll look after you. Back before people and stock took so much care, that was true. Longhorn cattle didn't have to be sack fed the minute the temperature dropped below 50 degrees. Tough hided old grannies didn't need fancy hair curlers and \$2 or \$3 worth of handkerchiefs and scarfs like these modern models.

It seems like every day ranching becomes more like running a nursery. And women! Women nowadays are through work before the 10 o'clock news at night. They must dawdle a lot during the day.

Sheep and cows on this outfit are going to be surprised. Last winter, we didn't have to feed much. This year we are going to cut down on the amount of mesquite wood that we burn in the fireplace.

Nowadays a load of baldface steers won't pay the trailer expense. Hombres living a long ways from the post office can't afford a special trip to pick up their auction receipts. Cowmen have to be mighty careful to stay afloat. C.B. radio operators are apt to be hearing calls for help this winter, calls a lot more serious than the chatter that's going on about the highway patrol.

We've been on a budget for a year. Last summer Goat Whiskers the Younger and our outfit split the cost on a division fence. Whiskers kept books on the deal. When the fence was finished, we even divided up the cedar bark and the post butts that were left on the ground.

Things have really changed since the cow boom soured. Three years ago, an old boy standing with a bunch of us cow herders drinking coffee at the stock show asked if we knew where he could but four laying hens.

After he was gone, we made a big scene laughing about a fellow so old fashioned that he was looking for laying hens. In about six months, I was wishing I'd followed that chicken buyer home instead of wasting time talking to that crowd of smart alecs.

Sure, it was the good old days back then. Foldover checkbooks were stocking from new jacket pockets. Australian hide dealers were under to bring in ostrich hide for new boots. Bankers were sitting in the stands buying lambs with smiles on their faces larger than the kids getting the money. Buy chickens? Not on your life. An Arabian sheik would have had to strike the corrals with his walking stick to gain attention. Cow money had blinded us all.

Four laying hens, you know, eat a pound coffee can full of milo a day. Chickens don't stand by huge concrete troughs to fill their small craws. The fattest pullet ever shipped didn't have to be taken to 1200 pounds. The largest Rhode Island rooster to ever deface a sidewalk never caused as much grief as one cow has.

I can't explain why I didn't buy some chickens. Eggs are a big expense at the house. Child Who Sits in the Sun eats a dozen raw ones every week. She'd eat the chickens, too. But that wouldn't be as bad as raising cattle for total strangers to eat at giveaway prices.

Mertzson has so many dogs that wild African chickens are the only breed that'd be able to lay anywhere except on the courthouse roof. Still, I know that a few chickens will beat a bunch of cattle.

All sorts of glorious market prophecies are coming at the new year. Outsiders are just trying to encourage us so they'll have plenty of ground chuck and sirloin strips at bargain prices.

I'm looking for the stranger who wanted the laying hens. I keep watching for him at savings and loan associations and at safety deposit values. If you ever see him but at a cow sale, be sure and let me know about it first.